

## **Pap Tests (Screening for Cervical Cancer)**

Each year, approximately 13,000 American women develop cancer of the cervix. *Fortunately*, if cervical cancer is found early, there is a much greater chance that it can be cured.

### **What is a Pap test?**

A Pap test is often a part of a routine pelvic exam, and is a useful tool in the early detection of cervical cancer. During a *pelvic exam*, the doctor feels the uterus, vagina, ovaries, fallopian tubes, bladder, and rectum in order to check for any abnormalities in their size or shape.

During a pelvic exam, the doctor may perform a Pap *smear*. An instrument called a speculum is inserted into your vagina so that the cervix (the narrow, lower part of the uterus) can be seen. While the vaginal walls are held open, the doctor collects cells from your cervix with a cervical brush and a tiny wooden spatula. The cells are smeared onto a glass slide and sent to a lab. The slide is then looked at for abnormal cells.

### **Who needs to be concerned about cervical cancer?**

Women between the ages of 18 and 65 who have ever been sexually active are at *routine* risk for cervical cancer. The following people are at *increased* risk:

- ✓ Women who have been infected with the human papillomavirus (HPV);
- ✓ Women who started to have sex before the age of 18 and have had multiple sex partners;
- ✓ Women who smoke.

### **What can I do to prevent cervical cancer?**

Cervical cancer is not yet preventable, but by having Pap tests, you increase your chances of finding cervical cancer in its earliest stages, when it is most curable. Have a Pap test every year starting at age 18. Women who have had three normal tests may only need to have a Pap test every three years. Women over age 65 with consistently normal Pap tests may not need further testing. Consult your doctor for advice.